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SUBJECT: Seminary Lecturer Discusses Protestantism in Guangdong,
Harmonious Society, Underground Churches

REFERENCE: Beijing 1963

(U) This document is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A lecturer at the Guangdong Union Theological Seminary provided an overview of the small but active provincial Protestant community. It has ties with U.S. and Hong Kong religious institutions and seeks to maintain good relations with the government. Local governments have encouraged Guangdong religious organizations to provide more social services, particularly disaster relief, under the rubric of building a "harmonious society." Underground churches do not register because of historical, practical, or ideological reasons. END SUMMARY

Protestantism in Guangdong

¶2. (SBU) Guangdong Union Theological Seminary lecturer Huang Tianhua described Guangdong's Christian community as relatively small compared to other provinces, such as Fujian, Zhejiang, and Henan. He told Congenoff on April 4 that Guangdong has 700 Protestant churches with 300,000 registered members. Many of the churches are located in villages and in the northeast part of the province, in cities such as Shantou, Meizhou, and Shanwei. He said the number of Christians in Guangdong is growing, though it has slowed from the pace of a few years ago.

¶3. (SBU) Though Protestant churches are officially non-denominational, Huang said individual churches sometimes align themselves with particular doctrines. He noted that many of Guangzhou's churches follow Methodist or Anglican teachings because of the British influence during the 19th century. Guangdong's rural churches are generally more fundamentalist than urban churches, according to Huang. He said the church derives all of its funding from donations and receives no government financial support whatsoever. Very little funding comes from foreign sources, with the occasional exception of money coming from Hong Kong.

¶4. (SBU) Since proselytizing is illegal in China, churches rely on word of mouth to gain new members. He said churches are allowed to distribute one-page flyers quoting scripture on their grounds, but cannot pass out pamphlets on the street. In a recent conversation with Congenoff, the president of the Guangzhou International Christian Fellowship (GIFC) said that, beginning a couple of years ago, some Guangzhou churches have begun distributing pamphlets on the streets. He added that government officials are no doubt aware of the practice.

International Exchanges

15. (SBU) Huang said the increasing frequency of exchanges between Chinese and foreign students, teachers, and pastors has made the Protestant church a more modern organization. Most of the Guangdong seminary's international exchanges are with Hong Kong, the United States, and Europe. Tuition is typically funded through scholarships at the receiving institution. Huang has traveled to the United States a number of times, including three times during the past year. A conference hosted by the Fuller Theological Seminary in March, at which Huang participated, included teachers from several Chinese seminaries as well as pastors from grassroots churches in Anhui, Jiangxi, and Hangzhou.

16. (SBU) Though Chinese law prohibits foreign pastors from preaching in Chinese churches, the government has not prevented them from lecturing at the Guangdong seminary. Huang added that the Guangdong seminary frequently hosts guest lecturers, and two American pastors were arriving the following week, one a Baptist from Tennessee and the other an Anglican from Connecticut.

Relations with the Government; Building a "Harmonious Society"

17. (SBU) Huang was positive about the relationship among Guangdong churches, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and GCC, and the government. He said the Religious Affairs Bureau does not typically deal directly with individual churches; rather TSPM and GCC act as liaisons. Huang stressed that TSPM and GCC are not government agencies, and represent the interest of churches. Practically speaking, TSPM and GCC are the same organization as they use the same staff, according to Huang.

18. (SBU) Huang said China's religious organizations are contributing to a more active civil society while also supporting the

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government's policy of building a "harmonious society." Huang noted that government approval is more forthcoming now than in the past for church-related social services such as day care, medical assistance, and educational scholarships. Officials have also put pressure on religious groups in recent years to contribute financially to disaster relief efforts. Huang said Christians should see this as an opportunity to prove their worth "through deeds instead of words."

Underground Churches and Cults

19. (SBU) Huang acknowledged that underground churches are common in Guangdong, but could not estimate their size or number. When asked why these groups choose not to register, he said it is usually for one of three reasons: historical (they see GCC as a government puppet, which Huang said was true 25 years ago but is no longer the case); practical (they fail to reach required thresholds for members, financial reporting, or facility safety); and theological (they see registering as "obeying man instead of God"). Huang emphasized that it is in the long-term interest of underground churches to register because they can draw on the legal and management expertise of GCC. Religious cults are rare in Guangdong, according to Huang, but are nevertheless a concern in rural areas because registered and unregistered village churches lack trained pastors.

Biographic Information

110. (SBU) Reverend Huang began teaching at the Guangdong Protestant Seminary in 2006, after completing a three-year master's degree in theology in Hong Kong at the China Graduate School of Theology. Prior to that, he worked in Guangzhou as a pastor and administrator for the Guangdong Christian Council (GCC) for 11 years. He is originally from Meizhou, Guangdong and speaks Cantonese, Hakka, Mandarin, and English. The Guangdong seminary, which is one of 18 Protestant seminaries in China and celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2006, has 72 students, eight full-time faculty, and ten part-time faculty.

